

KUSHAN SCULPTURE

IMAGES FROM EARLY INDIA



The Cleveland Museum of Art
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KUSHAN SCULPTURE: IMAGES FROM EARLY INDIA
November 13, 1985 - January 5, 1986

A major loan exhibition, Kushan Sculpture: Images from Early India, presents important sculptures of two regions of north India, Mathura and Gandhara, from the 1st through the 5th centuries AD. The exhibition is the first to present important Mathuran art alongside important Gandharan art, thus making the first complete representation of sculpture of the Kushan dynasty. The great majority of the sculptures are of stone, fluently carved from the rock that is a dominant feature of the Indian landscape.

Dr. Stanislaw Czuma, the Cleveland Museum's curator of Indian and South-east Asian Art, has organized Kushan Sculpture, which opens at the Museum on November 13, 1985, and closes on January 5, 1986. It will then travel to Asia Society Galleries, New York, and to the Seattle Art Museum. In addition to Kushan Sculpture, the Museum is organizing three related exhibitions drawn from its own collections and a rich and varied schedule of events as part of the nationwide Festival of India. The Festival is organized jointly by the Government of India and the Indo-U.S. Subcommittee on Education and Culture. Dr. Evan Turner, director of The Cleveland Museum of Art, has been a U.S. member of the Subcommittee's committee on museums for the past seven years.

Of the 128 works of art in Kushan Sculpture, about a third are from the holdings of The Cleveland Museum of Art, which has the finest collection of

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Mathuran art in the United States. Most of the sculptures come from U.S. collections, with about thirty especially important loans from Europe and India.

The Kushans.

The Kushans were of Central Asian origin. Part of a protracted nomadic migration from the western borders of China along the edge of the Gobi Desert, they entered northwest India through the opening between the high mountain ranges that has been the historic avenue for invaders. By the middle of the first century AD, a prince of the Kushan ("kuei-shang") who had made himself dominant gave his clan name to all the conquering nomadic groups. The Kushan dynasty grew powerful and extended its authority over a large area--from the northwest, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the region around Delhi--which it dominated for the next three centuries.

Trade routes connecting China and the Mediterranean, the two extremities of the then known world, crossed territories controlled by the Kushans. As trade increased, the Kushans and their lands prospered, and a vigorous eclectic culture developed. The nomadic Kushans had few cultural traditions to impose on the local populations and readily adapted to the cultures of the lands they had conquered. One of the many distinctive qualities that makes Kushan art historically intriguing is the co-existence of two different styles, both sponsored by the state and both in the service of the state's favored religion. The more common historical experience is that one art style "speaks" for the ruler, the state, and the dominant religion.

The reign of the third Kushan ruler, Kanishka, marks a great flourishing of Indian civilization. He encouraged art and scholarship, protected all

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religions while ardently promoting Buddhism, and spread far beyond the borders of his realm Indian culture and the Buddhist faith, including images of the Buddha and his Bodhisattvas. Kanishka established Kushan rule over the plains of the river Ganges, with Mathura as capital, and over the northwest territories, with Peshawar as capital. These are the geographic areas and art styles from which the exhibition draws: from the central northern plains, the art of Mathura; and from the northwest Himalayas, the art of Gandhara.

Mathura.

Mathura was a major cultural, religious, and commercial center of the Kushan world, esteemed for its religious and racial tolerance. Its name in Sanskrit means "delight." Brahmanism (Hinduism), Buddhism, and Jainism flourished there side by side, each mingling with and absorbing images and attitudes of early nature cults. The principal local material for sculpture was a reddish sandstone; ivory, metal, and terra cotta were also used.

Mathura's sculptural tradition spans ten centuries, from the 3rd century BC to the 7th century AD. Its most vital and active years were the three centuries--1st to 3rd century AD--under Kushan rule. Mathuran sculpture in the Kushan period was based on the indigenous sculptural heritage of robust males (yakshas) and voluptuous females (yakshis), idealized human images that served as semi-divine nature spirits. Imposing physical presences of great vitality, these sculptured beings are partly nude or scantily clothed, their garments carved to appear transparent, revealing the yielding flesh beneath.

The sculptor shaped his image according to what it should look like, rather than what it really looked like. While he observed life around him, the Mathuran

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sculptor's "realism" has little in common with realism as understood by a Western, or even by a Gandharan, artist. The great Indian scholar, Ananda Coomaraswamy, said: "In Indian art it is not the appearance, but the significance of objects, human or otherwise, that is sought for...in an abstract art it is not the object, but a concept that stands before us."

Buddhist sculptures are generally either free-standing images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, or figures which were originally part of the architectural decoration of monuments. Since Buddha and Bodhisattva images were created within set iconographic boundaries, it was the Mathuran artist's irrepressible sculptural sense, playing with volumes and movement, that created freshness and vitality within these limits.

Figures from architectural fragments are much more varied and lively, partly because the artist was less restricted in these secondary idols by canonical rules and formulas. Pot-bellied yakshas symbolize abundance, wealth, and protection. Voluptuous maidens continue the ancient tradition of mother goddesses symbolizing fertility, such as the imposing Nagini (snake goddess of the waters) from Cleveland's collection or the radiant yakshi on a railing pillar from the Indian Museum, Calcutta. They are the Indian ideal of feminine beauty: a smiling, tender woman offering a body ripe with swelling hips, slender waist, and full, rounded breasts.

Bacchanalian themes--drunken and dancing figures with Dionysian undertones--were not uncommon on Buddhist monuments, perhaps intended to remind the faithful how perishable are life's physical joys. Few images in this extraordinary exhibition are more memorable than that of the Drunken Courtesan (from the National Museum, Delhi), a beautiful inebriated yakshi, assisted by yaksha revelers, sinking helplessly to her knees.

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The Kushan rulers also commissioned many royal portrait sculptures. Often on a monumental scale, these figures stress austere geometry and rich royal dress, usually the Scythian nomad's belted and padded costume, so unlike Indian dress. (A fine example is the Castana from the Government Museum, Mathura.) On some coins, true portraits appear, as evidenced by the dozen important coins in the exhibition. Kushan rulers used the portraits much as they used Buddhism, which they preached so enthusiastically, to strengthen and glorify their diverse, farflung empire.

Gandhara.

The ancient name of the Peshawar Valley gave its name to the Gandharan school of Kushan sculpture. Gandharan art had its roots in the Hellenistic tradition, first brought to the northwest Himalayas in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great's legions in their farthest thrust into Asia. Early Gandharan sculpture reveals Hellenic influences, while the later "advanced" style seems based more directly on Roman prototypes. An exceptionally beautiful Buddha head, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, stands for the best of Gandharan art, wedding the clarity of the Classical tradition with the serenity of Buddhist faith.

Gandharan art, unlike Mathuran, was almost exclusively Buddhist. Its most popular image is the Buddha. Gandharan artists, who took special interest in the life of the historical Buddha, invented the iconography which minutely details the events of his life. How the garment is draped, how the hair is arranged, what hand gestures (mudras) are used, these fine points may distinguish the Buddha images of Gandhara from those of Mathura in one century or another.

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The Gandharan artist more closely observed real people than the Mathuran sculptor did, yet it seems fairly certain that he often followed a stereotype to carry a spiritual message. The Bodhisattva was an ideal being, setting a standard for the faithful to follow. The image presented physical perfection; its beauty implied purity and beauty of soul. These goals were sometimes sacrificed for dramatic or expressive purposes, as in images of gaunt fasting ascetics or zealous worshipers. The Emaciated Siddhartha from the Museum for Indian Art, Berlin, is a haunting image of the Buddha's superhuman effort to achieve enlightenment.

The favored materials of Gandharan sculpture are schist--a stone that comes in many shades of gray--and stucco. Because stucco was soft and easy to work with, it could be hand carved and fashioned into vigorous and expressive representations, though the sculptor had to work swiftly before the stucco dried and set. Stucco is more fragile than schist, but many stucco pieces have survived. Most stucco figures were conceived as relief sculpture and attached to a wall background; when the wall crumbled, the figure was lost. The stucco heads, shaped in the round or in very high relief, survived by the thousands. Even the idealized heads of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were given variety, individuality, and the illusion of life through psychological content and intensity.

The Buddha Image.

The image of the Buddha, the most important iconographic theme in Buddhist sculpture, appears for the first time during the Kushan period. The earliest representations were symbols signifying the presence of the Buddha: the empty throne, the royal umbrella, the Bodhi tree, the wheel of the law, footprints.

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Such aniconic representations derive from the Hināyana Buddhist doctrine that Buddha was a mortal teacher; there was no need for an idol to worship.

As Buddhism during Kushan times attracted a wider following and assimilated many aspects of ancient popular Indian religion, the original reforming faith became more complex and ritualistic. Mahayana Buddhist doctrines evolved, gradually attributing miracles and godly characteristics to the Buddha and stimulating the creation of an image of the Buddha that would be an icon. Certain attributes and poses were adopted from much older Indian practices --for example, the pose of meditation was adapted from yoga, and yaksha iconography was absorbed into Bodhisattva figures.

Scholars have for nearly a century disputed whether the Mathuran or Gandharan school originated the image of the Buddha, when and how it evolved, the chronology of development in each school, and the exchange of influence between them. Influence seems to have seesawed throughout the Kushan period until sometime after the mid-3rd century, when a Sasanian (Persian) invasion diminished the productivity of the Mathuran school. The dominant Kushan style then became the Gandharan, until that was brutally ended by 5th-century Hun invasions. The primary impulse in Mathuran sculpture as it revived was to reject the "foreign" Gandharan influence and return to indigenous Indian forms, developing into the sculpture of the Gupta period, which at Mathura and other centers produced some of the most beautiful Buddha images ever made.

The effort to date objects is a significant aspect of the exhibition, which presents and publishes some works of art for the first time. There are only five known dated images from Gandhara, on which the chronology of the entire school rests. One of these five dated images is in the show, as well as one dated Mathura image. On the basis of dated images and his other research

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for this pioneering exhibition, Dr. Czuma concludes that Buddha images are found simultaneously in both schools around the very beginning of the Kanishka era, and argues persuasively for Mathura as their ideological and stylistic source.

Other Exhibitions and Activities.

The three complementary exhibitions drawn from the collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art examine the history of the Buddha image, Indian textiles, and the relationship between Eastern and Western images. Films, lectures, musical performances, public events, and classes are scheduled throughout the fall of 1985.

Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council help the Museum to present these exhibitions and programs as part of the Festival of India. All four exhibitions and all of the events are free and open to the public.

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For additional information, photographs, or color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.